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Grade inflation takes a toll on students

By Fredreka Schouten, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — High school graduates in Nevada with at least a B grade average can win \$10,000 college scholarships — a free ride through any public university in the state.

But that ride has proved rough for many. Nearly a third of the kids who get the scholarships, which were created to keep the state's most promising students in Nevada, have to take remedial classes when they start college.

They are not alone. Around the country, even students with stellar high school records have discovered that they don't have all the skills to survive in college. In Georgia, for instance, four out of 10 students who earn the popular Hope Scholarships to the state's university system lose the scholarship after they earn about 30 credits — roughly a year's worth of work — because they can't keep their grades up.

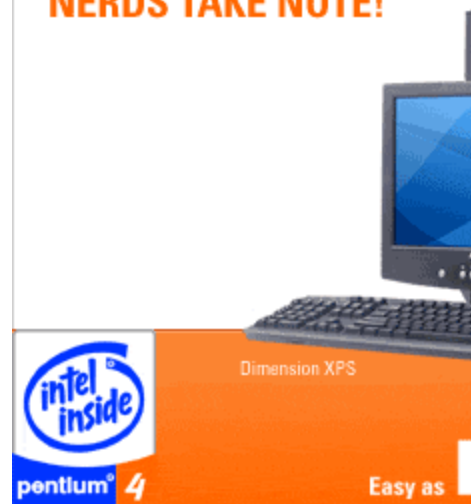
Performances on college admissions tests point to possible grade inflation. Fifteen years ago, students with A averages accounted for 28% of SAT test takers, says Wayne Camara, who oversees research for the College Board.

Today, 42% of college-bound seniors have A averages, but they score no better on the college admissions tests than did A students a decade earlier.

Some education experts say the trend is a clear sign that high school teachers are handing out high grades for weak work. But many say the real culprit is the typical high school course load. Students just aren't taking the rigorous math, science and writing classes in high school that

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they need to succeed in college and the workplace.

Only 1 in 3 18-year-olds is even minimally prepared for college, according to a report by the Manhattan Institute, a New York-based think tank. The picture is even bleaker for minorities: Only 20% of black students in the class of 2001 were college-ready.

Ivrekia Stanley thought her prospects were bright when she graduated from Forest Park High School in suburban Atlanta in 1999. Her 3.6 grade-point average earned her a Hope Scholarship, but when she entered Georgia Perimeter College, a two-year community college, she had to take remedial classes in reading and math.

"You get discouraged. You don't want to tell anybody you're in these classes," Stanley says. She recalls she kept telling herself, "I have a Hope Scholarship. I'm smarter than this."

This fall, the 22-year-old transferred to Georgia State, where she majors in criminal justice. She has a 3.8 grade-point average and has retained the Hope Scholarship.

But about 40% of Hope Scholars who entered Georgia schools as freshmen in fall 2000 failed to maintain the minimum 3.0 GPA in their first 30 credit hours of college work.

Statistics like those have inspired officials in Nevada to set up mentoring programs to help Millennium Scholarship recipients and students from the state's rural areas stay in school, says Barbara King, who oversees tutoring programs at the University of Nevada-Reno.

King runs an Internet mailing list for the students where she posts reminders about finding tutors and deadlines for dropping classes. She also tries to improve their study habits.

"I tell them to pay attention to repetition during lecture," King says. "The second time a professor says something, underline it. The third time, put a 'T' for 'test' next to it. It probably will be on the test."

Researchers say that when it comes to college success, what students study in high school is as important as their study skills.

Those who study math for four years in high school, taking classes such as trigonometry and calculus that are harder than second-year algebra, double their chances of earning a bachelor's degree, says Clifford Adelman, a U.S. Department of Education researcher who has examined thousands of high school and college transcripts.

His advice to parents: "Encourage your kids to be challenged in (high) school, and worry less about grades."

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